



CISTERCIAN ABBEY

OUR LADY OF SPRING BANK

34633 W. FAIRVIEW ROAD

OCONOMOWOC, WISCONSIN 53066

July 30, 1975.

Mr. Russell Gilbert
P.O. Box 3274
Santa Rosa, CA 95403

Dear Russ:

Thank you for your nice letter of a month ago. In June I went around a little in the South, so I am late with all my correspondence. I had a meeting in New Orleans and another one in Mepkin (S.C.) and in between I visited several monasteries.

From your letter I can make a better picture of you and I like what I see. That you had -and have- difficulties in the family is an unhappy circumstance, but, as I see, in the same time it obliges to you to fight for your education, to earn your living - and this can be a very important factor in teaching the earnestness of the life, that you have only that for which you work and fight. This is true in the material life, but it is true in the spiritual life too. We have everything as a gift of God, but generally the gift of God is that we have the strength and persistency in working for the spiritual perfection; and that the resultats are quite bigger than the work. Very rarely, nearly never do we have something in the spiritual life for which we have not to work. - So your difficult experience has certainly a great value for your spiritual life too. - You write that you are "behind schedule". - you know, everybody is. Striving for God means that we want to have Him at once and completely. He gives Himself to us at once and completely, but we cannot receive Him, because we have in ourselves so many things which occupy some "place" in our soul. When we empty ourselves from all self-love and all vices, then we can receive God as He gives Himself to us - but the emptying ourselves takes the whole life, and the schedules and the programs we make generally suppose that we adhere to our vices quite less, than actually we do. The important is to work on ourselves and make progress. The life is not a train which works according to a timetable. (Even trains do it rarely...)

The Thomas Aquinas College seems to have a very good program and certainly you will have a lot of good from the study there. It is good in this sense too: it gives to you a better grasp of the questions, so you can better decide your vocation, with other words you can better see where is God calling you..

The formation program in our Monastery is about the following (changes are possible, but not very probable). Normally the postulants come in late August. There is about five months of postulancy, followed by one year of novitiate. This period serves to learn our way of life, there are classes on different subjects, (Rule of St. Benedict, History of the Order, Cistercian Life today, Chant, Canon law for religious, Latin, Ascetics etc.). This takes about one year and a half. Those for the choir (priest or not priest) go afterward to the Monastery of

Hauterive in Switzerland. There is the continuation of the monastic formation in the Monastery, and philosophical and theological studies at the University of Fribourg. The time for that can be somewhere between three and four six years, depending on the preceeding studies. There is no rule: the University decides which credits are computed there. After that follows the ordination -for those who become priests- and then work, prayer, and private study in the Monastery.

It is not easy to make a comparison with the Benedictines. In the Cistercian Order and the Benedictine Order there are so different communities, that you can make a comparison only a monastery to monastery base. There are Benedictine monasteries which are much more similar to Spring Bank, than many Cistercian monasteries. The basic thing is whether a monastery in the course of the history did accept some ordinary apostolic work, or not. You have this in the OSB and in the O.Cist. St. Marie du Lac -the Monastery you mention- is certainly similar to our basics. But there are some imponderable differences: our tradition is different in many things than the Benedictine tradition: our liturgy is generally much more simple; the formalism in our monasteries are generally less; in the spiritual life -in consequence of such Cistercian authors as St. Benedict, St. Aelred, St. Gueric etc.- has a bigger accent on personal devotion than generally at the Benedictines; the belonging together of the whole Order -even after the organisational changes of the last General Chapter- is much more intensive than for the Benedictines. For us the Order is the way of life, as it was since the foundation, for the Benedictines Congregations and Confederation is generally something imposed by the Holy See. The cooperation, exchange of ideas, help is very alive between Cistercians and Benedictines, but we are a different family. - You know, the "religious families" have their existence and their characteristics not so much in ideological reasons, but simply because they are a different "family", i.e. different foundation, different internal customs, different tradition, different identity. If you take two American families, living in the same city, having the same number of children, the same interest, the same Church, the same clubs, the same occupation -they are very similar, but they are two different families - and in many small things they are quite different. I am always more convinced that this is the main difference between the religious families.

For your friend, Jack Fitzgerald, probably comes my answer to late. But you know, I began this letter the 30th of July, and I am finishing it the 23rd of August. In between is a simple profession, an investiture of a novice, the arrival of three postulants - and some other works. - For every case: we do not have organized retreats. Generally we have groups who bring their own retreat-master, or individual retreats, i.e. people who make retreats alone, for themselves, just seeking some conversation with a priest. We have not the necessary number of priests for organized retreats. We have to concentrate ourselves on the building up of the community, as I wrote to you. - For every case, if Jack wants to come, he should just write, or call; we can certainly find for him place, when he wants to come.

I have to finish. I will return to other questions in another letter. If not, I will never finish this letter.

With my prayers and best greetings I am
sincerely yours in Christ

F. Meier